

## **In Water We Grow**

Romans 4:13-25

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

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### *Romans 4:13-25*

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”) —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith “was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

Now the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

### *Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16*

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,

“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

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Barren. Empty. Fruitless.

In the time of Abram and Sarai to be childless was to be impoverished. It was a poverty that had nothing to do with material wealth or financial success. For a woman to not become pregnant, for God to have closed her womb instead of opening it, was a sign of her failure in her purpose to be a mother, to be a child-bearer. In ancient times it was understood that an infertile woman had sinned or earned God’s displeasure. She was dis-graced, she was seen as having been distanced, having been removed, from God’s grace.

It would take 25 years--the length of a generation-- of waiting and patience and trust, and perhaps times when they each needed to reassure one another that God’s promise to bless them, to make of them a great nation, to be the ones in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed<sup>i</sup>, would one day be an actual reality, that God’s grace was indeed with them, no matter what others around them thought, no matter the absurdity of their ages to become first-time parents.

Then finally came the day in God’s own time for God’s promise to begin, to be born to Abraham and Sarah to become the parents of nations. It happened as the Lord appeared to Abram again. “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. (Sarah), I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

And the seemingly impossible happened as Sarah became pregnant with Isaac, the one who is the first generation of the forever covenant. The womb that God had seemed to have closed up instead gave life into which all their heirs, the family of faith tree, which is the whole first chapter of the Gospel Matthew, from Abraham to Jesus, and into which we too were born as heirs of the promise, the covenant.

As Isaac grew in the waters of Sarah’s womb, God’s everlasting covenant was going to be born. New life was growing where it had only been wished for, hoped for, and imagined. He was nurtured in the water of the womb, the first home of every human being,<sup>ii</sup> the place where God’s covenant began. And in the waters of the womb for each generation since, it is the place where the covenant never ends, where each and every time the promise is renewed. “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”

In *Living a Holy Adventure*, theologian Bruce Epperly<sup>iii</sup>, says, “The relationship between God, Abraham and Sarah gives birth to an everlasting covenant with humankind. God forges a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, and then us. Most contracts have time limits but God’s

covenant is everlasting and invites us to share in God's eternity in an ever-changing world. God's covenant still stands and includes us. Covenant is about birth and growth. When we respond positively to God's covenantal love, new possibilities emerge."

At the heart of the covenant, God promises abiding presence, grace, and love to a people and a creation that God will not abandon. It is a generous promise to live faithfully together. The conditions God imposes upon Godself invite a human response.

The Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous."

So, what does it mean to walk blameless before God as a sign of the covenant? Biblical scholar Alejandro Botta<sup>iv</sup> explains it this way. When you look at Genesis, where the covenant begins, alongside other books of the Bible, where the covenant is fleshed out, to behave in a way that is called "blameless," like Noah or Job is to know God. Knowing God means doing a couple different things. In 1 Kings, Psalms, Proverbs and Isaiah, it means to fear God. In 1 Chronicles, it means to serve God. In another part of Isaiah, to believe in God, and another Psalm, to trust God and cleave to God. In Jeremiah, a good king is said to truly know God when he dispensed justice and equity and upheld the rights of the poor and needy. Blamelessness then is a commitment in the best ways we can to serve God and to care for those who need it most, to walk with God with awe and confidence and in hope as God entrusts fallible people with a powerful covenant.

By faith we have been born into the Abrahamic covenant along the line of our faith ancestors, into the promise of universal blessing through Abraham, fulfilled through Christ. God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah begins to define the family of God, to which you and I belong.

In the season of Lent as we travel through the wilderness with Jesus and on to Jerusalem, to the cross and finally to Easter joy, we are reminded that a covenant is a living promise built on grace and love and mutual accountability.<sup>v</sup> The actions of God's covenantal promises are clear. Lent is a season in which we reflect on our promises for the covenant which were spiritually born into as we seek to walk blameless before God as a sign of the covenant.

It is also a time to reflect on the everlasting covenant first begun with Abraham and Sarah and in the waters of the womb of Isaac, the covenant graciously offered to us even if we have felt, even if we been deemed dis-graced. Our covenant with God is never barren, empty or fruitless. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Gen 12: 2-3

<sup>ii</sup> Tianna Bratcher: *Water of the Womb*

<sup>iii</sup> Bruce Epperly: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2024/02/adventurous-lectionary-the-second-sunday-in-lent-feb-25>

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<sup>iv</sup> Alejandro F. Botta, "Second Sunday in Lent," Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B Featuring 22 New Holy Days for Justice, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011)

<sup>v</sup>Northern California Nevada Conf. UCC Committee on Ministry <http://www.ncnuc.org>,